DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 192 PC 018 774

AUTHOR Higgins, Andrew
TITLE Rural Education and the Beginning Teacher.
PUB DATE Feb 92
NOTE 9p.; In: Cameron, Jim M. R., Ed.; Griffith, Dennis A., Ed. Education, Equity, and the Crisis in the Rural Community. Proceedings of the Rural Education Research Association Conference (Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia, February 1992); see RC 018 770.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; Community Involvement; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Models; Rural Areas; *Rural Education; *School Community Relationship; *Social Isolation; *Teacher Education; Teacher Placement; Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Isolation (Geographic); *Teacher Isolation

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the major issues beginning teachers face in their first postings to rural areas in Australia. The issues go beyond pedagogy. Beginning teachers need to understand social factors affecting rural communities so they can link lessons to the realities experienced by students. Geographic isolation affects the provision of education in terms of time taken to travel, cost, terrain, and technology. Rural communities have groups that are socially isolated from each other and from the staff in schools. In order to teach effectively, teachers need to be aware of the social context of the community in which they live and work. Teachers in rural areas suffer from professional isolation and often confront teaching situations for which they have had little formal preparation. Communities in remote places often move quickly to adopt technological means to overcome their isolation. Teachers in rural areas need to identify and promote the media skills of students, not only to be able to use equipment, but also to analyze and comprehend the type and character of the message provided. A three-dimensional model for assessing education in isolated places includes types of isolation, ways of coping with isolation, and conditions affecting potential for change among the isolated. All three, when considered together, affect the form, quality, and extent of education in remote places. Institutions preparing teachers need to incorporate elements of preparation for rural teaching into their curriculum. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED348192

Rural Education and the Beginning Teacher

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Cameron
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Andrew Higgins, *Queensland Department of Education*

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate some of the major issues beginning teachers will face in their first postings to rural areas. The issues are not only those of pedagogy but also those of living in rural places, of understanding the factors affecting isolation and how their combination can influence events in and out of the classroom.

The types of isolation, ways of coping with isolation and conditions affecting isolated people are a world-wide phenomenon that impact on the delivery of rural education in western countries, including Australia.[1] These factors hold great significance for teachers starting work in rural areas. An understanding and appreciation of these factors can influence how successfully teachers can interact with the community as a whole and with the students they teach.

In Australia, as elsewhere, the value of agricultural and mixed commodities varies with changes in worldwide demand and, as a consequence, rural incomes fluctuate, sometimes dramatically. For example, if the value of a mineral rises, as gold does during war or depression, the number of gold mines and miners rises, swelling the population in gold mining towns and increasing the demand for teachers. In other circumstances, the opposite occurs and mines close. Similarly, when prices for wheat, beef, wool and sugar rise, farmers, graziers and pastoralists prosper, and small towns grow, as do enrolments in private schools. In poorer times, families keep older children at home and spend less in towns.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Farmers collectives, such as the Australian Wheat or Wool Boards, attempt to influence farming incomes by governing the supply side of the supply and demand equation in order to achieve a more evenly spread income. However, farm employees and residents in small towns cannot influence income as easily, except through organised labour, which is effective only for those who are employed. The result is uncertainty of income and of future prospects, particularly for the young.

Primary producers in the developed world sought to improve the efficiency of agriculture, mining and fishing by the application of technology and capital to their enterprises. Mines use more machines, farms consolidate and apply more efficient equipment to reduce labour costs and maintain profits. As a result, primary producers need fewer people in their enterprises. The

RC 018774

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

geographical result of this economic trend has been the 'rural-urban' drift - the movement of people gradually from rural to urban environments. The most obvious consequences are seen in the decline of small towns, the closures of schools and banks and, finally, the cessation of the town as a viable social and economic proposition. Some of the larger regional centres grow as people move away from the smaller towns. Statistically, the population within an area may appear to have changed little, but the peoples' values may have altered from a rural to a more urban perspective.

Cy Maxwell,[2] on behalf of the organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), pointed to four major trends in western rural societies:

- the rural-urban migration;
- decentralisation of educational service delivery;
- rural dissatisfaction with inflexible educational service, and
- a renewed respect for rural education models.

In particular, Maxwell[3] highlighted the benefits associated with rural schools:

1. 'the role of the rural school as a source of community pride, identity and stability in its setting;

2. the informal familial environment which exists in many (though by no means all) small rural schools;

3. the relative success of rural schools in teaching the so-called 'basics';

4. the historic role of schools in sparsely populated areas as natural laboratories for such 'innovative' educational practices as individualised instruction, cross-age grouping, older students teaching younger students, using the community as a learning resource and 'mainstreaming' mildly handicapped children;

5. concern about equal educational opportunity which have emerged over recent years; and

6. the recent preoccupation with equity generally, and aid to disadvantaged populations in particular.

Recognition of these elements is important for beginning teachers because each provides indicators to the nature of the community in which the school is located so that teachers can work effectively. They need to be able to relate to the community as a whole and to understand some of its major concerns. This, in turn, helps teachers to see the students as individuals within the contexts of their own world. Being aware of this context not only leads to an easier social acceptance but also to a capacity to link each lesson to the daily realities experienced by the students in the class.

Steven Clark,[4] makes a distinction between 'rural education' and 'education in rural areas'.

This analytical approach demonstrates the confusion arising among educators when considering this topic. Teachers need to clarify the concepts because they draw a neat distinction between, on one hand, the provision of a standardised statewide education (in curriculum terms) and on the other, a curriculum specifically designed for students tied to the rural location. 'Rural education' in this setting becomes 'agricultural education' or, for Aboriginal people, 'culturally-based education', while education in rural areas becomes the means of providing a common curriculum in a rural place.

The distinction is important because it points to often unrecognised or unspoken concerns held by communities about the education students receive. For example, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community may see only a limited relevance of a state curriculum for the students in terms of a community's lifestyle. Some communities, especially the more remote, prefer to limit a culturally inappropriate curriculum. The outcome tends towards the preservation of that community's beliefs and value system at the expense of allowing students access to a broader (if more dominant) way of knowing. On the other side of the coin, the application of a statewide, rigid curriculum, while giving all students an 'equal' education misses the point that students are different and contributes towards a cultural uniformity.[5]

Teachers working in disadvantaged urban schools who also worked in some larger rural schools at the secondary level comment on the similarities they find in the attitudes and expectations of students in both the rural and urban environments. Yet, rural and urban situations appear to be fundamentally different. The paradox is difficult to explain. State and Commonwealth education systems recognise it by providing funds to schools in accordance with indices of disadvantage established for the Special Programs Schools Scheme and the Disadvantaged (or Priority) Country Areas Program (PCAP in Queensland). Each program seeks to alleviate disadvantage and both rely on the communities in the eligible areas applying for funds to overcome difficulties caused by local circumstances. It is significant that both schemes allow for diversity in response but insist on involving not only the school and its teachers in the preparation of submissions, but the applications also have to demonstrate community involvement and support.

Schemes designed to improve schooling often used the concepts associated with 'Equality of Opportunity' to justify unequal expenditure on some aspects of educational provision. The development of educational provision to Australia as a whole has been characterised by a rigid concept of uniformity. It came to mean equal provision of buildings (of a standard design regardless of climate), instructional material and pupil-teacher ratios. This situation raises the question about the wisdom of having a common public policy that disregards local circumstances in the broad sense, but then making minor allowances through special schemes afterwards.

Looking specifically at rural education, teachers might ask what are the characteristics of isolation and what these mean for educational provision. The feature most frequently associated with Australian isolation is geography. Great distances and sparse population characterise the world's remote places, but the notion of distance is not confined to the distance between places. There are other factors, including time taken to travel, cost, terrain and

technology. Itinerant teachers based in Schools of Distance Education/Schools of the Air travel great distances to visit the most remote stations and properties. If the purpose of the travel is communication, then telephones (terrestrial or satellite) can be used to eliminate travel.

Geographic isolation is not the only form of isolation: minority cultural groups, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are isolated from the values of the dominant Eurocentric Australians. In some cases, they are even isolated from their own lands because of land tenancy laws and historical events. Similarly, non-English speaking immigrant communities in remote places may also be isolated from the English-speaking majority.[6] Both of the groups create special problems in the provision of education because their needs are complex and unfamiliar to educational administrative personnel. Additionally, neither may use English as the usual language of communication.

Social isolation occurs equally in rural and urban societies, but its effects stand out clearly in smaller remote communities. Social differences recur through differences in status attributable to circumstances of birth, employment, wealth and class grouping. Teachers, in the primary schools will soon be made aware of the differences between families owning properties and using the Schools of Distance Education and those who live in town and attend the local school. Similarly, the tradition of some families sending students to boarding school as opposed to those attending the local small high school (or secondary department) will become evident to secondary teachers. In fact, one small town, Charters Towers in Queensland, has six secondary schools supporting boarding students and a State High School catering for the local students. The pastoral town of Toowoomba, one-thousand kilometres to the south of Charters Towers, is in a similar position. Some families maintain their own traditions of sending students only to certain schools in major cities such as Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. Rural teachers should be aware of the status levels families accord to themselves or are given by others. Of course, such information makes no difference in the classroom context, but may help the teacher be more aware of social context prevailing in the community in which, for the time, that teacher must live.

In some small, but well established rural places, the community's members are well aware that teachers are only temporary residents, keeping good company with other officers employed by a variety of government agencies or major banks. For some residents, the cost of investing too much energy in befriending peripatetic teachers is too high. It is to this extent that teachers suffer social isolation and tend to turn more towards other non-permanent residents for social relaxation. As a consequence, the more distant the teachers are from the concerns of the families, the greater is the communication gap between the teachers, the students and their families. One experienced school administrator, a female deputy principal, adopted a policy of always accepting the first social invitations offered to her, but chose subsequent ones with much more care. She reasoned that, by being willing to participate in the town's life, she demonstrated a commitment to her job of teaching in that place. Her experience showed that first invitations refused rarely resulted in second offers. To summarise, rural communities have groups socially isolated from each other and from the itinerant staff in schools. Teachers ought to be aware of these divisions so that they can function more effectively.

Teachers are often asked to confront teaching situations for which they have had little formal preparation, for example, in the education of students with special needs. In the smallest schools, teachers, especially beginning teachers, feel professionally isolated from the appropriate specialist help. Education Departments employ visiting guidance officers, remedial, resource, music and physical education teachers to give specialised assistance. However, in the smallest schools such specialists can only visit on infrequent occasions and the permanent staff need to rely on telephones to keep in touch with regionally or centrally-based 'experts' who are desk bound and able to answer phone calls. Most education systems offer in-service work to beginning teachers, sometimes by way of a reduced teaching load and in-house seminars. On other occasions new staff may participate in a week's Withdrawal from the classroom. The purpose of such sessions is to enhance skills and reduce the sense of professional isolation felt by teachers, but they rarely contain sufficient training in preparing teachers to deal expertly with students having outstanding special needs.

Education Departments recognised the professional isolation suffered by teachers. For example, in Queensland the fore-runner of the Secondary Correspondence School was a system of education using notes of teacher-training lecture notes being mailed to teachers working in remote places. By reading the notes, passing examinations and by being inspected regularly, teachers could move up a promotional ladder from unclassified assistant teachers to Head Teacher of a primary school with several other teachers on the staff. By using the Correspondence System, Departments slowly raised the qualifications of teachers and today, many teachers pursue higher degrees by enrolling in externally offered university courses.

Communities in remote places often move quickly to adopt technological means to overcome their isolation. The rapidity with which such communities adopted radio communications gives testimony to this fact. The urban-rural division mentioned frequently in rural studies literature emphasises the need for an ongoing interaction between rural and urban communities. Rural radio and television programs serve to respect this need.

Despite such efforts it is a fact that most teachers have their origins in Australia's coastal cities. When moving to rural areas, teachers may recognise that isolated people develop a strong sense of 'Community' because of the similarities of the interests. For example, the establishment of the Isolated Childrens' Parents Association at Bourke (NSW) in 1970 demonstrates the communal concerns showed by the most remote farming families for the education of their children. The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Committee performs a similar function for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.

The Remote Area Teacher Education Project (RATEP) delivers higher education teacher preparation courses on-site to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In effect, it trains community people to become community teachers without them having to move to formal institutions such as university campuses. An increasing self-awareness among isolated communities may lead to the development of special communications skills. For example, at a basic level, even very young children on remote properties operate High Frequency radio sets during 'on-air' lessons with Schools of Distance Education. More general communications in isolated places arise from radio and television broadcasts. These originate in major cities,

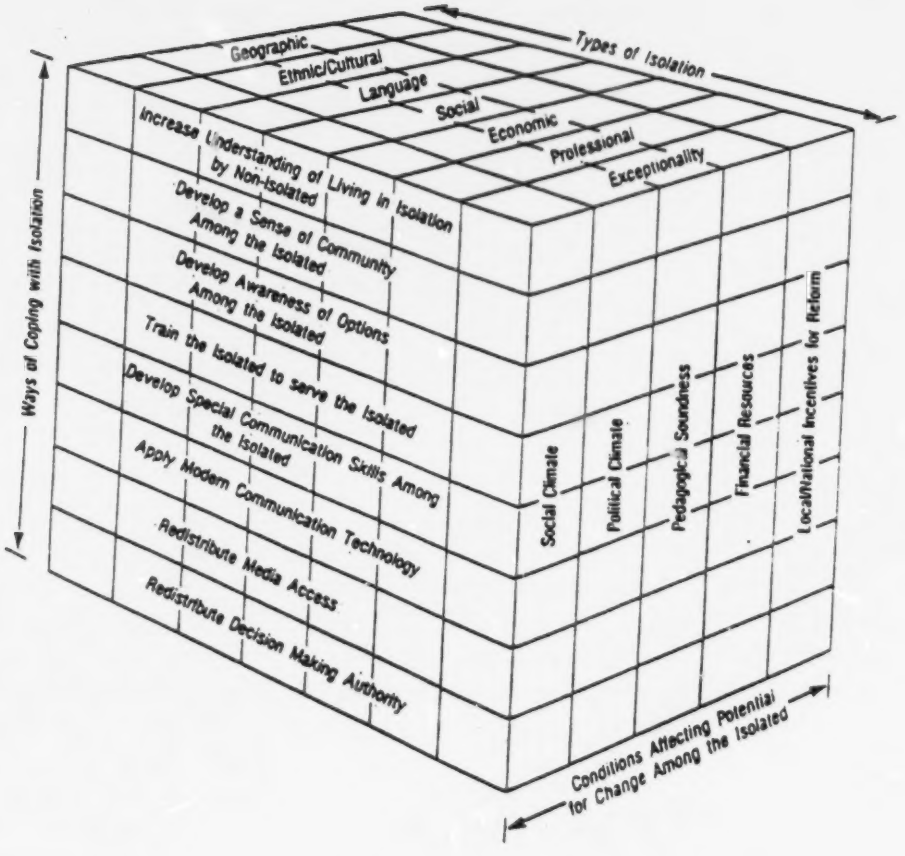
reflecting the concerns of the urban people. Some stations include local content, but only the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association focuses on minority (Aboriginal) issues. News, current affairs and sports broadcasts help to weld a nation by giving it common experiences, but syndicated foreign programs lack significant cultural, national or local reference. Teachers need to identify and promote the media skills of rural students, not only to be able to use equipment, but also to analyse and comprehend the type and character of the message provided through the medium.[7]

Teachers working in any educational setting are influenced by the social and political climates. Stress on topics changes from time to time, leading to different curriculum emphases. Greater understanding of how children learn means changes to teaching techniques or assessment methods. General economic wellbeing of the state or the nation affects the availability of funds to implement educational change and innovation. Also, the administrative climate within schools and departments affects the willingness of teachers to seek change in the educational enterprise. All of these factors combine together to influence the responses isolated communities and teachers make in the provision of education to the students. The following diagram[8] (Figure 1) identifies three dimensions of isolation: types of isolation, ways of coping with isolation and conditions affecting potential for change among the isolated. All three impinge on the form, quality and extent of education in remote places. Each dimension, when analysed independently of the others, seems to be simple. But when each dimension is considered in relationship to the other two, then the process of analysis becomes a complex but more satisfying means of analysing education in isolated places.

Teachers beginning their careers in rural schools will recognise that 'rural education, or the provision of education to rural areas is not a single entity, but a complex task of relating curriculum to people in places being taught by those whose tenure may be only temporary. As Darnell and Higgins[9] claim 'The particular combination of qualities that go to make up rural people and how they perceive the world around them may distinguish the character of rural life more than geography and vocation. As respecters of learning on one hand, but with the inclination to be suspicious of institutions on the other, the school is often a paradox to rural residents. To reduce the paradoxical element in school/community relationships will require a more closely aligned partnership between community residents and school staffs.' The solution, then might be to allow communities to have more say in the operation of their schools.

It is into situations such as this that beginning teachers, whose origins are most likely to have been urban in character and whose social and pedagogoic skills are least developed, are thrust. Teacher preparation courses focus attention on content and method but perhaps students might also benefit by being introduced to those factors that influence the communities in which they will be employed. Most institutions preparing teachers would claim to incorporate elements of preparation for rural teaching but perhaps it is time to consider the matter in more depth than is often the case today.

FIGURE 1



Three-dimensional Model for Assessing Inter-relatedness of Factors that Impinge on Education in Isolated Places

ENDNOTES

1 Banaji, J.,'Summary of Selected Parts of Kautsky's 'The Agrarian Question" in Buttel, F. and Newby, H., *The Rural Sociology of Advanced Societies*, Croom-Helm, London, 1980.

2 Maxwell, C., 'Quality in the Absence of Quantity, Education in Sparsely Populated Areas of Developed Countries, in Darnell, F. & Simpson, P.M.(eds) *Rural Education: In Pursuit of Excellence*, NCRRE, University of Western Australia, 1981. p. 20-22.

3 ibid, p. 21.

4 Clark, S.'Rural Education - The State of the Art' in Walton J and McShane, M. (eds), *Think Tank on Research in Rural Education*, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1990.

5 Darnell, F. and Higgins, A.H., 'Factors and Issues in Australian Rural Education: A Case for New Perspectives', in Browns, R.K. and Foster, E., *Sociology of Education* (3rd edn.) Melbourne, MacMillan, 1983, pp. 25-33.

6 For example, the Finnish Community at Mt Isa or the Italian communities on the Atherton Tablelands.

7 Smith, R. 'A Model for Remote Area Education' in McShane, M. and Walton, S. (eds) op. cit., p.124-130.

8 Higgins, A.H., 'Using Satellites to Alleviate Rural Educational Remoteness', *Unicorn*, Vol. 11, No. 3, August 1985.

9 Darnell, F., and Higgins, A.H., 'Factors and Issues in Australian Rural Education', op. cit., p. 29.